
Potentialities and Capabilities of Bookmobiles For Library Service

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DESPITE THE PHENOMENAL INCREASE in the use of bookmobiles since World War II there are still many librarians who question their efficacy as a means for providing any kind of adequate library service. The arguments of these librarians are primarily these two: first, bookmobiles by their very nature move from one place to another and must of necessity provide much less time for public service at any given spot than a fixed agency; thus if the patron cannot reach the bookmobile when it is at his neighborhood stop he is without library service. Second, because of space limitations bookmobile collections must be relatively small, reference materials inadequate, and no facilities such as tables and chairs can be provided.

Now, some aspects of these criticisms of bookmobiles must be granted in their entirety. Others, however, need varying degrees of qualification. It is certainly true that a bookmobile must meet schedule requirements and thus cannot be, or at least usually is not, available for public use as many hours in a week as even most very small branch libraries. But perhaps this is not as damning as it at first appears. Most human activities are to some degree circumscribed by the time element. Do we, for instance, condemn the railroads, air lines, steamship companies, and bus operators because they attempt to operate on a fixed schedule and are available for our use only at specific times? Do we expect our doctor or dentist to treat our aches and pains at any time which suits our convenience? Are banks open until 9:00 p.m.? The comparison might be carried on indefinitely but to little purpose.

Obviously, people must schedule their bookmobile visits when the bookmobile is available and most can do so without inconvenience. Also, this is a mobile age and all libraries having bookmobiles also

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have a headquarters, usually branches, and certainly other bookmobile stops. The patron, if the library system is properly integrated, may jump in his car and make use of such library agencies as are open at times most convenient for him.

It must also be admitted that bookmobile space limitations prescribe large general book collections, reference materials, and tables and chairs. But neither does the average branch library score well on any of these criteria with the possible exception of the provision of seating. A bookmobile collection which is properly policed and frequently changed through access to an adequate reservoir collection is ordinarily at least as "live" as those of most smaller branches. This is certainly true of specialized bookmobile collections. Granted that a branch is apt to contain more volumes, unfortunately, a high percentage of the books are either obsolete or no longer in demand for other reasons. As for reference materials, while even the smallest branch will provide some of them they are generally inadequate beyond the most rudimentary requirements and the patron must go to either a large branch or to the central library to satisfy his needs.

As opposed to those librarians who condemn bookmobile service in toto there is a more moderate and rapidly growing group, to which the writer belongs, which feels that the bookmobile is a highly useful public service agency, in its place. Not even the most enthusiastic supporter of bookmobile service would claim that fixed location agencies should be done away with. The bookmobile should be viewed as an adjunct to, rather than a substitute for, branch or central libraries. As such it *has* its place.

Not all public libraries need bookmobiles and certainly their usefulness is greater under certain local conditions than it is in others. Generally speaking those libraries with large service areas and a relatively low population density will benefit most from bookmobiles, at least for adult usage. County and regional libraries are conspicuous examples. If a library proposes to serve elementary and high school age patrons at their schools the criteria of large areas and low population density assume less importance. Even medium-sized cities will normally have enough schools within their boundaries to keep at least one bookmobile busy.

The reader will note in the preceding paragraph that library service is described as being provided for elementary and high school age patrons at—not to—the schools. The choice of words is deliberate. The writer is unalterably opposed, unless the costs are underwritten

by the schools, to providing school library service through a local public library.

The St. Louis County Library, which has provided bookmobile service at both public and parochial schools since its establishment, has strongly maintained an important distinction despite efforts to persuade the County Library to give school library service as such. This distinction is that all transactions are with individual students and teachers. The only reason service is provided at schools is because these locations provide concentrations of potential patrons.

In actuality the County Library's service is of considerable value to the school people despite this philosophy of service. Teachers may and in many instances do request books by subject or author and title for use in connection with study units. Students do the same when they need materials for the preparation of a paper or for some specific project. These are in all instances, however, treated as individual requests and the individuals borrowing the materials are held responsible.

Having taken note of some of the arguments concerning what are considered the inadequacies of bookmobiles let us turn now to their virtues. If, as the writer believes, one of the major problems of library operation is that of distribution, bookmobiles are certainly important to both the patron and the library. It seems incontestable that a bookmobile can reach more people more economically than a branch library involving the same capital outlay and equivalent maintenance costs. Bookmobile service also represents an immediate economy directly to the patron. The bookmobile stop is usually closer to the patron's home than his branch library or may be located at a shopping center which he frequents. Payment for public transportation or costs of operating the family car are often thus considerably reduced.

This is especially true of bookmobile service at schools. The child is at the bookmobile stop and the parents suffer no inconvenience whatsoever. Even if the child could reach a branch library under his own power there are today's ever present traffic hazards and the concern over possible injury. At the school bookmobile stop the young patron normally does not have to leave his fenced in school playground.

One of the time honored but nonetheless valid clichés of librarianship is that accessibility is a strong determinant in promoting books and reading. Surely, then, a bookmobile at a neighborhood stop or school leaves little to be desired when it comes to making a visit to the library painless.

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A rarely mentioned attribute of bookmobile service is its dramatic quality. Adults and children alike feel this attraction and respond positively. School administrators and teachers tell us often that books which stand neglected in classroom collections or in the library are borrowed avidly from the bookmobile.

Another, though perhaps secondary, virtue of the bookmobile is its public relations value. These units, brightly colorful in appearance and bearing appropriate insignia and slogan messages, making their appointed rounds are constant reminders of the local public library and its facilities.

It is the writer's opinion that library systems large enough to use several bookmobiles should give serious consideration to specialization. As an example, the St. Louis County Library uses three categories of mobile units: adult, high school, and juvenile. There are several distinct advantages in this type of operation. The most obvious is that through specialization the book collections become more adequate for the clientele served. This is especially true of the high school and juvenile units. With a large bookmobile carrying up to 3,500 books for teen agers and in excess of 4,000 for elementary school readers it is readily apparent that only a very large branch library would have a better collection. Another advantage in specialization is that the bookmobile staff also become specialists and are able to do a better job. This applies particularly to untrained employees.

To some extent the elementary school pupils are a captive group and the herd instinct no doubt plays a part in convincing the reluctant reader that it is the thing to do to borrow a few books. Since it has been rather generally agreed that junior and senior high school students are prone to lose the reading habit it seems logical to assume that bookmobile service helps to preserve continuity in the use of the library. In this instance the mountain comes to Mohammed and there is greater likelihood of the junior and senior high school student using a bookmobile at his doorstep than there is of his visiting a branch or central library.

Finally, at the risk of appearing a cynical opportunist, the author would like to point out a major advantage which accrues to the library through bookmobile service at schools. It is axiomatic that American parents will do virtually anything within reason to promote the real or fancied welfare of their children. Bookmobile service at schools falls into this category with a vengeance. Although many parents themselves would perhaps not wish to be found dead in

a library they have somehow and by someone been indoctrinated with the idea that reading library books is a wholesome and highly desirable occupation for their off-spring.

The St. Louis County Library in its nonage, when it did not have a single fixed location agency of any consequence, was saved from extinction in 1947 and 1948 successively. Opponents of the Library promoted elections in both of these years having as their purpose the elimination of the fledgling institution. They lost and it was the parents of the children who used the bookmobiles who undoubtedly saved the day. The bookmobiles provided a ready made means of distributing pro-library publicity materials and it was done without stint through the children who carried the literature home to their parents.

In 1955, when the Library had only one adequate branch, an appeal was made to the voters for an increase in the operation and maintenance tax and, in addition, for a five year building fund tax. Again the bookmobiles proved their worth and the election was won handily despite some fairly vitriolic newspaper opposition. To a great degree, as has been said, the St. Louis County Library was built by bookmobiles.

During the St. Louis County Library's early days of bookmobile operation and particularly with the first high school unit some effort was made to provide rudimentary reference service. It was a failure and has been largely abandoned. The people who use the adult units do not visit them to do research but simply to borrow books in the collection or leave requests for materials to be delivered on the next bookmobile visit.

While the high school units seemingly offered greater possibilities for reference service their method of operation precluded success. Students are sent to the bookmobile in groups by classes and are allowed specific periods of time in which to select their books. These short time periods coupled with the inevitable chaos and confusion arising from a gaggle of teen-agers in a confined area were hardly conducive to research. Hence, the reference service was discontinued and the schools are now expected to provide their own reference collections.

As a means of handling quick reference service and expediting special requests the staff of the library have toyed from time to time with thoughts of short wave radios and mobile telephones. The mobile telephone offers the greatest potential, but has seemed prohibitive in

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cost. Short wave radio, though less expensive per bookmobile unit, was ruled out because it was felt that staff and patrons alike would be maddened by the constant chit-chat which would be heard simultaneously on all mobile units. At the rate with which methods of communication are being changed and improved it is quite possible that something will come along in a few years to solve the problem. If and when that happens the efficiency of the mobile unit will be markedly increased.

Neither is it possible, because of space limitations, to do much with special collections. The alert bookmobile librarian will, of course, have small collections of certain seasonal and holiday materials available as common sense dictates, but can do little more.

One highly popular special service given by the adult bookmobiles of the St. Louis County Library is taking requests for phonograph records to be delivered when they become available. The mobile units carry no phonograph records as a part of their collections but do have catalogs which the patrons may consult and then place requests. Another special service rendered adult patrons is the delivery of films to the various stops. Patrons telephone the headquarters library, place their requests, and then pick them up at the most convenient location. This has proved highly popular.

Our adult units also carry a limited number of periodicals, mostly monthly publications, of the type which are not subject to rapid obsolescence. Examples are: *Better Homes and Gardens*, *Ladies Home Journal*, *Readers' Digest*, and *Popular Mechanics*. This service has been very well received.

One of the criticisms which has been leveled against bookmobiles is the inadequacy of assistance to the individual patron. Certainly it is true that on units giving service at schools the pace is frequently so frenzied that the staff do well to handle charge-outs and returns. On adult units, however, there is normally more time for advising and assisting readers in making their selections. As in any other type of public service agency, competence of personnel is the key factor. It is also felt that the teachers should assume some responsibility for the books their pupils borrow. An effort is made to encourage, not always with conspicuous success, as much teacher participation as possible.

For a last word anent the potentialities and capabilities of bookmobiles for library service a reiteration of what has been said above may be the best. Under proper local conditions and if intelligently

operated bookmobiles can be extremely important, if not invaluable. Conversely, if the mobile units are too small, if their collections are inflexible, if the administration and staff take a dim view of their value or if the geographical situation does not warrant their use it is, no doubt, best to forget the whole thing. After all, as has been so often and so well said by so many wise men and women "the horse is here to stay."